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Baltimore-Set TV Show Inspires Real-Life Crime Reporting

When *The Wire*, David Simon's Baltimore-set saga of crime, politics, and journalism, started to become popular in Great Britain, an English journalist had an idea. Mark Hughes, a crime reporter with *The Independent*, a London-based international newspaper, contacted *The Baltimore Sun* to find out if *The Wire's* depiction of police officers, drug dealers, prosecutors, and politicians bore any resemblance to reality. The *Sun* agreed to welcome Hughes to Baltimore and have him report his findings in the paper. The deal ultimately became a journalist-exchange program, as Justin Fenton, the *Sun's* police reporter, was sent to London so that the two reporters could compare crime trends. Thus was born the ongoing feature "Crime: A Tale of Two Cities," which has been running in the *Sun* since the beginning of this month.

Hughes has covered the goings on at Scotland Yard and beyond in London for *The Independent* since 2008. Before that, he worked from Manchester as the north of England reporter. He joined *The Independent* in 2007 after working for three years on a regional newspaper in Carlisle.

Fenton has been covering crime for the *Sun* for five years, in both Baltimore City and the surrounding suburbs. Some of the topics he has covered during his award-winning time at the paper have included the Amish schoolhouse slayings in Lancaster, a three-part series about the odyssey of a female serial con artist, and a small town's crippling baseball stadium deal with a hometown athlete.

Hughes and Fenton have both since returned to their home cities after each spending about a week overseas. During his time in Baltimore, Hughes interviewed city government officials, went on patrol with police officers, spent time with social programs such as Living Classrooms and Safe Streets, spoke to Baltimore residents with drug addictions as well as drug dealers, and visited the court system. In his posts for "A Tale of Two Cities," he has expressed his belief that he has gotten a good overall impression of the city's crime picture. However, he has also mentioned his disappointment that both Mayor Sheila Dixon and Police Commissioner Frederick Bealefeld refused to be interviewed during his stay. During one attempt to talk to Mayor Dixon, Hughes was told that she did not walk to talk about crime. Hughes noted that Baltimore "is inextricably linked with crime" and that this image "has no doubt been exacerbated by *The Wire*." He seemed to suggest that there was a reticence to discuss the issue of crime because of this image of a crime-ridden Baltimore that the popularity of *The Wire* has certainly spread. One notable piece that Hughes posted was in regards to the many e-mails he received pointing out that most murders in Baltimore happen to people who are already involved in crime or the drug trade. The senders of these e-mails wanted to make it clear that Baltimore is not unlivable for everybody. While the likelihood of being murdered in Baltimore for someone with no criminal history is not considerable (1 in 16,000), it *is* more significant than the rate in Britain (1 in 85,000).

On the other side of the pond, Fenton spoke to reporters from *The Independent*, drove around on patrol with the police gang squad, and, unlike Hughes, he was able to speak to the police commissioner. Metropolitan Commissioner Sir

Paul Stephenson told Fenton that he was “pleased, not delighted” with crime reductions in London. Overall, Fenton felt that the Manchester area of London, despite its reputation as “Gunchester,” was hardly as dangerous as the worst parts of Baltimore. He spent about 14 hours on patrol, during which nothing exciting happened, and although that may not be enough time to get a fully accurate picture of the city, it was strikingly different from his experiences in Baltimore. In one of his posts, Fenton appealed to the words of London Mayor Boris Johnson, who himself believes that it is “far, far more dangerous in Baltimore than it is in London.”

Hughes and Fenton are currently brainstorming ideas to wrap up what they have learned in their time spent across the Atlantic. Continuing coverage of both of their posts can be found on *The Baltimore Sun’s* website, with occasional pieces appearing in the print edition of the paper. The story has also been covered by the Ed Norris Show on 105.7-FM The Fan, Fox45, and WAMU 88.5-FM, with links to the coverage on the *Sun’s* website.